

10 January 1959

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION WITH CONGRESSMAN CANNON,
Chairman of the House Appropriations Committee

At Mr. Cannon's request I called on him at 4:00 on January 9. He had not informed me of the purpose of the meeting. It was obvious from his initial questions that he wished to get some ideas from me as to where we stood on the race with the Russians with respect to guided missiles and nuclear propelled aircraft and submarines. I made it clear to Mr. Cannon that I did not feel competent to make comparative appraisals as it was outside of the scope of my work to familiarize myself with exactly where we stood with the Russians in the arms race, as I was not a technician with respect to the status of our own accomplishments in these technical fields. However, I would gladly talk with him about what information we had on the Soviet position.

Mr. Cannon seemed particularly interested in the question of when the Russians would likely have a nuclear powered aircraft. I said that as far as we knew, the Russians did not have one at the present time which had flown, and that if they produced one in 1959, I thought it would be more in the nature of a psychological stunt than the production of an effective and useful piece of military hardware. In view of the shielding problem which involved greatly increasing the weight of the aircraft, it would be difficult to have in the present art, an airplane that would have all the desired characteristics, particularly speed, for high military performance. I suggested that he could judge as well as I what the psychological effect of putting something up in the air, despite its technical characteristics, which was propelled by nuclear power, would be. I added that we assumed the Russians were working on a nuclear propelled aircraft but for what it was worth, they had indicated in the Geneva Conference that they did not as yet have one. In general, we thought that an effective nuclear powered airplane was several years off for the Russians. I declined to comment on our own program.

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Mr. Cannon remarked at the President's conference for the Congressional Leaders last Monday, there had been a statement made to the effect that we were 1 1/2 years behind the Russians in the guided missiles field. (Later, after conversations with Mr. Stans and Bryce Harlow, I ascertained that the statement to which Mr. Cannon referred, had been made by Keith Glennan, but that it was not quite as all-inclusive as Mr. Cannon had indicated, as it related chiefly to the development of launching engines with a high thrust.)


I told Mr. Cannon that in my opinion the Russians were probably technically somewhat ahead of us as they had devoted more time and energy to the guided missile program and all its components since they had taken over a large share of the German assets at the end of the war. Their ability to do this was facilitated by the fact that the German testing grounds were in the East and overrun first by the Russians. While we had gained from the Germans some of their highly trained technicians, including Braun, the Russians had gained more of hardware, and also many competent technicians. Consequently in the late '40s and early '50s they had been improving their techniques, particularly in the short range missiles and had gained certain advantages which we had not as yet overcome. However, just as the Russians who were well behind us in the same period in the production of nuclear weapons and aircraft, had narrowed the gap with us in recent years, so we should be able to narrow the gap with them in the guided missiles field.

Turning to the submarine question in which Mr. Cannon seemed particularly interested, I said that we had no evidence that the Russians had an atomic submarine now in operation although we were confident that they were working on the matter aggressively and we expected that they would soon produce them. I said that we had clear evidence that they had ceased their production of conventional submarines and we felt they were moving into the field of producing submarines to launch unconventional weapons as well as submarines propelled by nuclear power. I recalled that they had spoken from time to time that they were developing a nuclear powered icebreaker and that the hull of this had been launched some time back. We did not have any information that this hull was as yet being propelled by nuclear power although we assumed they were in the process of installing the nuclear reactors.

Mr. Cannon seemed satisfied with the information which I had given him and for which he thanked me. He made no comment with respect to our appropriations.

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ALLEN W. DULLES
Director